

# SOPHOCLES

496-406 B.C.

**S**ophocles<sup>1</sup> is one of three Greek tragic dramatists whose plays have been preserved for modern times. (Of the more than one hundred plays he wrote, complete copies of only seven remain.) He was born at Colonus,<sup>2</sup> near Athens. At the age of sixteen he was chosen to lead a chorus of boys in the celebration of Athens' great naval victory over the Persians at Salamis.<sup>3</sup> During his career he served his city in many posts at home and abroad and at the age of fifty-five became a general during the Samian War.<sup>4</sup>

We do not know exactly when Sophocles first entered plays in the annual dramatic competition at Athens. We do know, however, that he took the top prize for the first time when he was only twenty-eight. In that competition he defeated the great writer Aeschylus.<sup>5</sup> During his



*Sophocles, playwright of the Golden Age of Greece, performed many public duties in addition to his creative life as an artist. Born in 496 B.C., Sophocles lived for ninety years. At his birth, Athens was a young democracy experimenting with the new machinery of popular government. By the time of his death, Athens had been drained by the conflicts resulting from the Peloponnesian War.*

1. Sophocles\ˈsɒ-fəˈklɛz\.

2. Colonus\kəˈlɒ-nəs\.

3. Salamis\ˈsæl-ɪ-məs\ ancient capital of the island of Cyprus.

4. Samian\ˈsɑ-mi-ən\ from the Aegean island of Samos.

5. Aeschylus\ˈɛs-kə-ləs\ 525-456 B.C.

life he was awarded the first prize about twenty times, and he never placed lower than second in the contest.

Sophocles, like many great playwrights, was an innovator. For one thing, he introduced more elaborate scene-painting to the Greek theater. A more important contribution, however, was the addition of a third actor to the cast of his plays. Before Sophocles' time all the parts in the Greek plays (except the chorus) were taken by only two actors—a severe limitation. In adding the third actor, Sophocles opened new possibilities for a more complicated and flexible arrangement of the stage action.

### Antigone

*Antigone*<sup>1</sup> is a drama in which a strong-willed girl and her powerful uncle, each fiercely believing himself to be right, clash on a matter of principle. It is also one of the great and enduring works of our cultural heritage. The play belongs to that class of literature known as

*A member of the National Theater of Greece, Aphrodite Gregoriadou, appears in a production of the classic theater filmed in Delphi.*



4 CONFLICT OF WILLS

*tragedy*, which the ancient Greek dramatists developed to great heights.

### Tragedy

There is a legend in Greek mythology of a magnificent bird which is born from fire and ashes. Ancient Greeks named the bird the phoenix.<sup>2</sup> It is a strange conception: strength and life rising out of destruction. This conception was carried by the Greeks into an art form—the tragic drama—recognized as one of the most difficult yet enriching experiences of Western culture.

The subject of a tragedy is the downfall of a hero, usually ending with his destruction or death. The reader or playgoer who submits himself to tragedy shares the emotions of the tragic characters. This emotional tension increases almost to the breaking point. Then, as the hero faces the final, horrible truth, the audience experiences a release, a release not granted to the hero of the play. This release is reminiscent of the phoenix, since from the ashes of devastating emotion there rises a feeling of calm, a sense of harmony in the universe. The Greeks called this emotional effect *catharsis*.<sup>3</sup>

There are many theories about tragedy. Most of them stem from the work of the great Greek critic and philosopher Aristotle.<sup>4</sup> He examined the Greek tragedies and described them in his *Poetics*, a book still widely read today. The following are a few of the statements that have been made about tragedy, and for which there is general agreement among critics.

1. *Tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear, wonder and awe.* The reader watches the hero move toward his destruction; he has pity for him; he shares the hero's fear and suffering; he experiences wonder and awe before the forces of Fate. The emotional impact of tragedy

1. *Antigone*\ān 'tī-gō 'nē\.

2. *phoenix*\fē-nīx\ this legend is thought to relate to the sun as it dies in flames at sunset and rises in the fiery dawn.

3. *catharsis*\kə 'thar-səs\.

4. *Aristotle*\ə-'rīstə 'tō-təl\ 384–322 B.C.



is two-pronged: (a) the reader turns his thoughts inward to ponder his own fate; (b) the reader is moved to consider momentarily the fate of all human beings.

2. *A tragic hero must be a man or woman capable of great suffering.* Tragic heroes are often kings, queens, warriors, or persons of noble spirit and high position. They are not merely "upset" by the small annoyances and misfortunes of life. They are larger than life. Thus in the great suffering of unusually sensitive and noble persons, the reader can see more clearly the vast reaches of the human spirit.

3. *Tragedy explores the question of the ways of God to Man.* Men have always been disturbed about why God permits his creatures to suffer, often (from a human point of view) so needlessly. Tragedy does not propose a solution to this problem. It presents the question in dramatic form for us to contemplate.

4. *Tragedy purifies the emotions.* It purges the baser emotions so that the better ones shine forth. This is the doctrine of catharsis as formulated by Aristotle. The reader experiences mounting anguish which builds to a peak like gathering flood waters. Suddenly he feels as if a flood gate has been opened releasing the

*Portrait sculpture of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, pupil of Plato, and through him of Socrates. The ruins of the ancient theater at Hippios, sharing its valley with the cultivated fields of modern Greece.*

pent-up emotions, and in the place of the raging flood, flows a quiet, gentle stream. The point at which this happens in tragedy is called the climax.

5. *Tragedy shows how man is brought to disaster by a single flaw in his own character.* Each person's nature is composed not only of the noble, the dignified, and the godlike but also of the base, the ignoble, the bestial. Tragedy shows us a person who has noble attributes, but whose character is marred by a flaw which ultimately brings his downfall.

There have been very few masters of tragic drama. Three of them—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides<sup>5</sup>—wrote within a period of a few years during the "Golden Age" in ancient Greece. A fourth, William Shakespeare, wrote in our own language. In this book you will have an opportunity to read and compare two great tragedies; Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Sophocles' *Antigone* are different in their styles and

5. Euripides\yu 'rī-pō 'dēz\ approximately 480-406 B.C.

techniques, but alike in producing the impact of tragedy.

### The Greek Theater

Today, we think of the theater as a place of amusement. The Greek tragedies, however, were produced as part of an annual religious festival in Athens. Each year new plays were presented before the entire populace of the city, and an award was given to the playwright who presented the best series of three dramas. Sophocles received the prize often during his long, productive life.

The plays were put on beneath the bright skies of Greece, in huge outdoor amphitheaters, somewhat like modern football stadiums cut in half. Built upon hillsides, they seated as many as 40,000 people at a time. The stage was a slightly raised platform in the open area upon the ground. We do not know for certain all the details of the Greek theater. Scholars believe that the stage was backed by a structure with pillars and columns which could represent a palace or the walls of a city. All of the actors were men. They wore masks which may have

contained built-in megaphones to send their voices through the vast theater. Platform shoes gave them added height.

Thus the play depended more on the *words* the actor spoke than on subtle effects of facial expression or gesture. The actor's movements had to be broad and bold. This kind of theater has little relation to the *realistic* style of drama we expect today.

One aspect of the Greek theater which often confuses the modern readers is the chorus. We still find the chorus in our musical comedies, but it is rare in "serious" plays and films. The Greek chorus was a group of actors who moved and sang together. Actually the plays themselves developed from a kind of community sing when bit by bit a chorus grew up that told stories in song and verse. To this an actor was added who carried on a dialogue with the chorus. Then a second actor was added, and a third. With each additional actor, the chorus shrank in size and importance.

In Sophocles' time the chorus did many things. It could set the mood of the story with its poetic songs. It could represent the common people, the townspeople, "the man in the street." Sometimes the chorus sided with one or another character in the play. Sometimes it warned a character of impending disaster.

*Two scenes from the revival of the classic drama Electra performed at Epidauros by the National Theater of Greece during the Epidauros Festival, 1961.*



Often the chorus, with its folk truths and its common sense, created a contrast with the loftier passions and thoughts of the hero. The one thing the chorus did *not* do was mouth directly the ideas of the author. The modern reader of Greek drama must remember that the chorus functions as a character in the play.

The Greek theater developed certain *conventions* or standard ways of presenting action. All theaters have their conventions. For example, in a modern movie we accept a convention that shows an actor in London, New York, and Hong Kong all within the space of a minute or two. This movement of a man through time and space would have bewildered the ancient Greeks.

The Greek tragedy usually followed conventions requiring *unity* of time, place, and action. A play took place within a single day's time. The scene did not change; it usually remained in the courtyard of the palace or in the main square of the city. Unity of action meant that the writer concentrated on *one* story line at a time. There were no subplots or diversions.

The Greeks felt that physical horror was so repulsive to see that it ruined the artistic effect of the drama. Therefore, all violent actions took place offstage. They were reported to the audience by messengers.

The Greek tragic dramatists seldom invented original stories or characters. Over and over again, they went back to the old legends and epics of their people. Sophocles' audience knew the outcome of the story before arriving at the theater. Thus the Greek writer had little need to create suspense. Instead, he concentrated on character portrayal, on ideas, and on poetry. The center of the story was the emotions of the characters.

### The Background of *Antigone*

*Antigone* is a play complete in itself, but it is part of a series of three plays Sophocles wrote about the city of Thebes<sup>1</sup> and the family of Oedipus.<sup>2</sup> The other two are *Oedipus Rex* (*Oedipus the King*) and *Oedipus at Colonus*.



From the tragic conclusion to *Oedipus Rex* comes this scene of Alexis Minotis as Oedipus. The Greek National Theater production at Delphi.

The series follows the destiny of a family haunted by a curse that follows them from generation to generation.

The curse began with a prophecy by the oracle at Delphi<sup>3</sup> to the King and Queen of Thebes that their son (Oedipus) would kill his father and marry his own mother. To escape this fate, the parents left their baby alone in the mountains to die. But the child was found by a shepherd and eventually was adopted by the King and Queen of Corinth<sup>4</sup> and brought up as

1. Thebes\thēbz\.

2. Oedipus\ˈē-dī-pəs or ˈē-dī-pəs\.

3. Delphi\ˈdēl fī\.

4. Corinth\ˈkɔ-rənθ\.



In dramatic mask and costume, Douglas Campbell played Oedipus to an American audience at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival, Ontario, Canada.

their son—unaware of his real birth. Years later, grown to manhood, Oedipus unknowingly fulfilled the prophecy by killing his real father in an accidental meeting. Then he went on to Thebes, where he won the hand of the Queen, Jocasta,<sup>5</sup> and became King of the city. The play *Oedipus Rex* tells how, years later, he discovered the horrible truth about himself, put out his own eyes, and cast himself into exile. He left his brother-in-law, Creon,<sup>6</sup> as regent of Thebes, to look after his two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles,<sup>7</sup> and his daughters, Antigone and Ismene.<sup>8</sup> The death of Oedipus is the subject of *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Before he died, Oedipus had directed his sons to share the kingship of Thebes by occupying the throne in alternate years. However, after his initial reign, Eteocles refused to step down and banished his brother. Polyneices fled to Argos<sup>9</sup> where he married the daughter of King Adrastus and enlisted seven Argive chieftains to join him in an attack on Thebes. During the battle, the two brothers killed each other in a hand-to-hand fight. Their uncle,

Creon, was now King of Thebes. Maintaining that Eteocles had defended Thebes, Creon ordered him buried with all religious rites and honors. But Polyneices had brought an enemy force against the gates of Thebes, and so he must be regarded as a rebel and as such denied a religious burial. His body was to be left lying uncovered in the fields for beasts and birds to feed upon.

Antigone, the sister of both warriors, was appalled by Creon's order, since the ancient Greeks believed that the soul could not rest until the body had been properly buried. As Antigone saw it, her obligations to her dead brother and to the sacred laws of Heaven demand that she see his body buried, regardless of the laws of the state.

So the curse on the royal house of Thebes moves forward. Conflict is set in motion between two sincere and strong-willed people, Antigone and her uncle Creon, now the King.

5. Jocasta\jō 'kās-tə\.

6. Creon\kre-ōn\.

7. Polyneices\pō-ll 'nai-sēz\, Eteocles\ē 'tē-ō 'klēz\.

8. Ismene\is 'mē-nī\.

9. Argos\ar 'gōs\ a city state in south central Greece (adj. Argive).